

Responsibility, Intersubjectivity, and Recognition: The Case of Australian Young People Experiencing Homelessness

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Abstract

This paper draws on qualitative interviews with young people to theorise the relationship between notions of responsibility and the process of intersubjectivity and recognition for young people experiencing homelessness. It is argued that homelessness as a cultural trope carries a symbolic burden, associated with notions of irresponsibility, passivity, and moral failure. The paper argues that for young people who are or have experienced homelessness, these associations must be reflexively negotiated in the course of managing their intersubjective ties to achieve the recognition as worthy subjects which is a condition of meaningful subjectivity. This recognition is achieved in cultures of sociability in the context of literal homelessness, although when some young people move out of literal homelessness, they seek intersubjective ties from new sources of recognition associated with symbolic capital that the young people themselves recognise. Part of this process is a definition of previous intersubjective ties which is characterised by notions of irresponsibility and moral failure. Furthermore, young people in this project reconstruct the notion of responsibility, allowing the experience of morally worthy intersubjective selves in the context of the kind of institutional dependence intrinsic to the experience of homelessness.

Introduction.

Sociological literature discussing the process of subjectivity in the context of homelessness indicates that young people experiencing homelessness must negotiate a discursive terrain which constructs them as Other to the kinds of subjectivities conventionally valorised in contemporary Australia. As a cultural trope, homelessness can be said to carry a symbolic burden, associated as it is with morally loaded notions of passivity, irresponsibility and dangerousness. It is in this context that young people experiencing the profound structural disempowerment intrinsic to the experience of homelessness must negotiate the process of intersubjectivity. Drawing on nineteen qualitative interviews with young people in various stages of homelessness, this paper

intends to theorise the nature of this process. The data which forms the empirical component of this paper is drawn from a larger Phd project, and the following analysis represents a small part of that larger project.

Before establishing the theoretical framework by which I intend to make sense of the data, it is worth expanding on what it means to say that young people experiencing homelessness must negotiate a discursive terrain which constructs them as Other to conventionally valorised youthful subjectivities. Peter Kelly (2001; 2006) has previously argued that the notion of ‘at-risk youth,’ is a category which has been used to describe a wide variety of young people who constitute a problem for governance in the sense of not meeting the standards for education and employment that contemporary social institutions and governmental regimes require. Kelly argues that ‘youth at-risk’ can be seen as the binary opposite to the ‘entrepreneurial self,’ a kind of subjectivity characterised by responsibility, reflexivity, and individual self management. Kelly draws on the theorisation of modernity provided by Beck, as well as governmentality approaches, to argue that these notions of responsibility and reflexivity constitute the ideal subject of contemporary governance. This work has a strong resonance with previous literature on the issue of homelessness and subjectivity: Zufferey and Kerr (2004) describe the widespread use of an individual deficit based explanation for homelessness amongst their participant, and Boydell, Goering and Morrell-Bellai (2000) describe feelings of shame, and a devaluing of the self during homelessness as part of autobiographical narrative. Furlong (2001) argues that those experiencing homelessness are represented as untrustworthy, obscene and frightening. For young people, these associations bear some similarity to the notion that young people are fundamentally a problem for society, being both victims and agents of social disorder (Bessant and Watts, 1998) particularly if they do not move

through the transitions from school to work and family formation that are expected of them.

This is what it means to say that young people experiencing homelessness must negotiate intersubjective ties in a morally loaded discursive terrain to which they are a stigmatised Other. An adequate analysis of intersubjectivity in this context requires an account of the nature of intersubjectivity which can understand the way in which material and cultural processes interact to allow the creation of the subject positions thereby experienced by young people. In establishing this theoretical framework, in which the notions of responsibility and reflexivity play so important a part, it is worth mentioning the work of Beck, before theorising intersubjectivity as such.

In Beck's analysis of contemporary modernity as a risk society, the subject is called upon to negotiate difficult social structures, including those associated with persistent social structural problems such as homelessness, from the point of view of a reflexive individual. This individualisation has what Beck describes as a double face: individualised biographies are tied to the workings of the institutions that drive this individualisation, a process which constitutes a new form of societal integration. Responsibility as individual self management is valorised in a risk society, despite continuing structural inequality. Discourses of risk and responsibility are an important part of the conditions for subjectivity in late modernity, and these notions have an important influence on the negotiation of intersubjective ties, which Beck argues are also experienced in an individualised, reflexive way (1992).

Butler (1997) argues that subjectivity must be theorised from a perspective which acknowledges the importance of the Other in calling the subject into existence as a subject. The subject (before being constituted as such) is born into a pre-existing matrix of norms that constitute the discursive conditions through which subjectivity is

experienced. Meaningful subjectivity is contingent upon recognition by the Other of the positions from which we articulate our selves as social subjects. This recognition is made possible by conditions for intelligibility that pre-exist the individual self, and are morally loaded (Butler, 2005). However, in taking up these conditions, both the discursive regimes under which we live, and the Other that calls us into being, are made vulnerable, since these also constitute the conditions for the agency of the subject.

The discursive terrain constituting the conditions for subjectivity and intersubjectivity is saturated with exhortations to reflexivity and responsibility on the part of young people experiencing homelessness. With this background, I wish to demonstrate a few ways in which this context is influencing the reflexive negotiation of intersubjectivity and recognition on the part of some of these young people.

Homeless Young People, Intersubjectivity, and Recognition

Homelessness describes a variety of material conditions, ranging from street homelessness, to accommodation in housing services in the short or medium term. Literal homelessness, or rough sleeping, describes the minority of those experiencing homelessness, and three out of the twenty participants in this project were literally homeless. Nevertheless, accounts of literal homelessness are important in the sense that they demonstrate that cultures of sociability for literally homeless young people can provide the intersubjective recognition that Butler argues is a condition for meaningful subjectivity. The following narrative, from a participant I will call Catherine, illustrates one facet of this process. During the interview, Catherine describes a process whereby after being kicked out of her mother's home, she was able to establish a position within a group of other young people which made her feel

secure and valued. Catherine describes her position in the group at that time as ‘little miss innocent,’ a kind of gendered subject position characterised by a kind of vulnerability which, paradoxically, gave her a certain power in terms of an ability to procure material necessities.

They were just people I knew from when I first got kicked out of home and stuff and that why they always like made sure I was pretty safe. One of the guys who had like always been in the squat um he would always make sure he had the best bed like I would always kick him out of his own bed and made him go sleep amongst the rubbish just so I could have the good bed and stuff like that. I was pretty like, loved by them all.

Like I felt more accepted by them, like my mum was always trying to make you be something I didn’t want to be. And then they just accepted me for who I was, didn’t care like let me voice my own opinions and stuff like that and yeah so they just accepted me and that’s what I liked about it.

Catherine describes the others she was with during her period of literal homelessness in terms of safety and recognition. In her words, the other people experiencing homelessness who she knew at the time accepted her for herself, allowing her to speak as part of a valued group. This is contrasted to her relationship to her mother, as well as later in the interview to her relationship with teachers at school.

Catherine’s account of cultures of sociability in the context of homelessness is by no means typical of the other participants in this study. The following quotes from a participant who I call Emma are more typical in this respect. At the time of the interview, Emma was living in transitional housing, a form of housing service which provides young people with a medium term lease on a house of their own, after having been homeless for ten years. Emma’s discussion of other people experiencing homelessness is characterised by discourses of irresponsibility and moral failing:

I'm trying to just you know what I mean, get something going for me and just you know[...] That's why I'm doing something like this, because I'm saying though about my experience about things when I was homeless and how I am homeless still at the moment, but one thing I've definitely said to you is that I'm trying to do something to try to better my life. But most homeless people don't do that. And some of them don't give a damn, they just think 'oh everything's just a free ride' well it's not just a free ride, you can't scam everything and free ride you know.

Some people end up homeless because they've got drug problems. I can understand why because people don't want to deal with them and you know honestly, I've had a drug problem myself and then I got over it because I was tired of people saying no to me all the time and when someone says no to you it brings you down so much. And then I thought 'look I'll get clean and I'll fix my life up.' But I still see people who are still using and that and they think 'oh free ride this, free ride that, I get everything for free blah blah blah' and then it makes me think 'I can't believe that I used to be one of them.' But now I'm like changing.

By distancing herself from previous friends who she characterises as irresponsible and lazy 'free riders,' Emma is able to accomplish a responsible subject position. From this new perspective, her previous self, and her previous intersubjective ties, are saturated with notions of moral inferiority.

Emma, and many other participants, also describes a process of rational management of intersubjective ties, whereby many of the people she spent time with in the past were intentionally, carefully, excluded from her life:

What I started doing is I actually made a list of every single person I knowed. I put a list into the bad people, the good people, and the maybe people do you know what I mean? And I thought 'okay who's a bad person in my life' and I thought 'alright here's a name, a bad person' and I thought 'how's this person treat me', I write down everything how they treat me and believe it or not I've cut out a lot of people out of my life. [...]

Emma goes on to describe strategies by which she maintains the kinds of intersubjective ties she wants, based on which part of her list of associates other people fall into. The rationality and reflexivity reflected in Emma's account of

ordering her dealings with others resonates with Beck's assertion that in contemporary modernity "social relationships and social networks now have to be individually chosen; social ties, too, are becoming *reflexive*, so that they have to be established, maintained, and constantly renewed by individuals" (1992: 97). The reflexive process that Emma describes is also morally loaded, due to the discourses of irresponsibility and passivity that characterise the symbolic burden of homelessness. Part of this process is that Emma participates in research, allowing her story to be heard by a researcher who values her voice and recognises her as a worthy subject.

Emma describes her involvement in new intersubjective contexts, and her recognition by new and valued people, in the following way:

I think it was, a good 13 months of me isolating myself and really taking in everything about myself, and within that 13 months I started joining groups to really build my self esteem again and I kept talking to my workers and I kept seeing doctors and I kept going through a process when I was really realising who the hell I was, and I asked all the good people in my life to help me with it.

Securing recognition for her new self from others, such as doctors at homelessness services, youth workers, and members of groups for young people who are, in her words 'trying to better their lives', are described in terms of 'realising who the hell I was.' Emma's involvement in new intersubjective contexts, in which she can gain recognition as a morally worthwhile subject from people who, in Bourdieu's (1990) terms, have symbolic capital which Emma herself recognises, is described as finding a new, authentic kind of selfhood, a subjectivity narrated in contrast to a previous, irresponsible, morally inferior self.

For young people experiencing homelessness, the relationship between the morally loaded notion of responsibility and processes of intersubjective recognition is played out in a structural context characterised by tremendous instability with regards to the material necessities of daily life. The frequent contact with youth and homelessness services, and the need for intersubjective recognition within these institutional contexts, complicates the notion of responsibility for the young people in this research. The following from a participant I call Melissa illustrates some of the tensions inherent in dealing with this context:

There's a fine line between being dependent on people and asking for a hand when you really need it.

[...] they're pretty much polar differences. Like one, when you're stubborn like you're not helping yourself at all because it's like you know 'I can't ask for help, I'm not that low' but it's like 'you're homeless mate you're pretty low and you really have nowhere to go' so how is not asking for help and being stubborn and trying to do everything yourself going to help your situation. It's probably going to make you worse because you're going to find it harder and harder to cope [...] And being dependent on people, you just, that's the whole thing you're just dependent on people and if something does happen you break and you just can't function without like, someone holding your hand the whole way. And you can't even be able to help yourself and [...] evolve as some kind of responsible human being I guess you can say.

Melissa's discussion of responsibility and dependence reflects a definition of responsibility which is not purely individualistic. Instrumental support from various institutions is necessary for her daily survival. Melissa describes her contact with these institutions as a form of the responsibility required to negotiate the kind of structural and institutional context that Beck describes. This definition of responsibility, which can also be seen in Emma's narrative of a search for intersubjective recognition from doctors and youth workers, and can be read as a response to the tension between the institutional dependence of individualised

biographies, and morally loaded exhortations to individual self management, the negotiation of which is made more urgent by the symbolic burden that the trope of homelessness carries.

Discussion.

It is not my intention to argue that the young people I have discussed in this paper are merely performing entrepreneurial subject positions, since these are valorised in contemporary Australian society. Rather, I argue that the relationship between the process of individualisation described by Beck, and the symbolic burden that homelessness carries, is such that young people experiencing homelessness must negotiate discourses of irresponsibility and moral worth in articulating their own intersubjective selves. The processes of recognition that Butler argues are a condition for meaningful subjectivity can and do take place in cultures of sociability in the context of literal homelessness. For some young people who are no longer literally homeless, involvement in these kinds of intersubjective ties is devalued as a part of the young person's autobiographical narrative, characterised in terms of a past irresponsibility and juxtaposed with a new, responsible and morally worthwhile subjectivity. Recognition of this subjectivity by those with symbolic capital, including the researcher, is a crucial element of this process.

The notion of responsibility that the participants in this project describe also influences this process. This definition is one that is congruent with the negotiation of contemporary social structures and institutions, as well as forming the basis for the process of intersubjective recognition just described. Therefore, rather than a rearticulation of the kind of governmental regimes that Kelly describes, this process can be more properly read as a response to the complexity of the social context that

these young people are in, and which becomes part of the process of intersubjectivity in a morally loaded discursive terrain.

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